

Dual careers as a barrier to mobility

Managing the dual career issue

The profile of the expatriate family has changed considerably in recent years. As a result, factors which determine the success or failure of an assignment are also evolving.

Whilst ECA International's Trends in Managing Mobility Survey reports that the profile of expatriates hasn't changed significantly (most expatriates are in the 31-40 age range and male), the traditional understanding and treatment of the family has evolved, and needs to be provided for by company policy.

More and more women are pursuing careers, and have to consider their own options if their husbands are offered an assignment. And it's not just married couples. The definition of what constitutes family has altered with unmarried couples expecting to be offered the same rights and conditions as married couples, and the increasing social recognition in many countries of the rights of same sex couples. These trends widen the pool of constituents likely to be affected by companies' policies (or lack of) designed to deal with dual careers.

Given these demographic trends, it is no surprise that ECA's Trends in Managing Mobility Survey shows that dual careers are an issue for nearly 70% of expatriating companies. Just over 10% say that partner career issues are the most common reason for assignment failure, and more than half say that the partner's career is a reason given for their assignees turning down an assignment in the first place.

With many companies again increasing the number of international assignees they use to take advantage of the economic upturn, what measures are they taking to reduce the obvious obstacle to employee mobility that partner career issues present?

Assignee selection – including the partner

Interestingly, most companies continue to select assignees on the basis of their technical skills and abilities, rather than their ability to perform their jobs *in the new circumstances*. Fewer than 25% of companies assess non-technical characteristics such as adaptability and social sensibilities of the potential assignee, and even fewer interview a partner for the same characteristics.

Since the personal situation and characteristics of the assignee will heavily influence the success of the assignment, it is advisable for companies to interview both the potential assignee and the partner at the beginning of the selection process. A couple already under strain for whatever reason will find accepting an international assignment a further burden, particularly if all the implications have not been properly explored and potential issues arising from any dual career situation have been missed. Involving the partner at an early stage will also demonstrate that the company takes their needs seriously.

Helping the expatriate partner in practical terms

Few companies provide actual financial assistance to partners (around 20%). Typically, this will take the form of a one-off grant for spending on career guidance, education and training support, or to help with a job search in the new location. Even fewer companies will directly compensate for the loss of a partner's income (around 3%), and even in these cases compensation is normally significantly less than the actual loss.

Instead, practical assistance is more likely to be offered to the couple relocating. Examples of this include the provision of information about what to expect in the new location, help with understanding the financial impact of the move, contacts to help them on arrival in the new location, and information to help them find job opportunities, including self-employment and assistance in obtaining a work permit.

In many cases, though, this latter is not possible. Getting a work permit for a partner, irrespective of their sex or marital status, can be a major challenge outside Europe, due to the lack of work permit agreements. Currently, many partners are asked to forfeit career progression, pension and social security contributions and their salaries in order to relocate – all because they are unable to work in the country of assignment. It is this obstacle which presents the biggest challenge to HR departments trying to facilitate international mobility.

Working with the Permits Foundation

As a membership company serving the needs of multinational companies worldwide, ECA International supports the work of the Permits Foundation.

By encouraging governments to relax their rules on work permits for partners, Permits will help overcome one of the greatest barriers to mobility today. With this challenge diminished, companies will widen the pool of candidates for international assignments from which they can select the best possible person for the job, better fulfilling the needs of their business.

About ECA International

ECA International is the world's largest membership organization for international human resources, serving a global network of over 4000 HR professionals in 35 countries. The leading provider of online data, software solutions and advice for more than 1500 international companies, ECA's innovative approach has been providing cost-effective solutions to international HR management since 1971.

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